Taking Care of an Injured Environment. A Feminist Way to Recover after Disaster: Evidences from the Seveso Case

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Introduction

The paper that I am here presenting is part of the work on my PhD Thesis, studying the collective responses to the Seveso disaster (Centemeri, 2005). My thesis centres upon two entangled issues: the recognition and the repair of the damage caused to the population and territory of Seveso, as a result of the release of dioxin following the industrial accident of the Icmesa chemical manufacturing plant in 1976. My main interest has been to examine the social, political and moral conflicts deriving from the incident, with close reference to the definition of the damage and of its repair, whilst bringing to the fore the changes that these caused to the affected community and to their modes of territorial organisation.

As underlined by Jasanoff (1994), an industrial accident is an event which throws into question the stable consensus shared by actors, institutions, rules, behaviours and artefacts in an at once social and technical system. Debates as to how these events are to be interpreted, how to define the damage, acknowledging faults and responsibilities, and which policies of repair are to be applied, all offer material for reflection on the methods of collective treatment of issues regarding health, security, development and the environment. Such methods becomes visible through the voices heard and through their interpretations, which are however excluded from the public debate following the incidents.

My decision to choose a classical disaster as a case study derives from my interest in the issues of recognition and repair, both of which need to be analysed in an appropriate time period of observation. This disaster entered the history of the European regulation of industrial risks (van Eijndhoven, 1994) with the Directives named after the place of the accident, Seveso. The incident took place on the 10th of July 1976 at the chemical factory of Icmesa (owned by the Swiss multinational Roche, through the controlled company Givaudan), and resulted in dioxin contamination covering an extensive part of the territory of Seveso and other neighbouring municipalities.

This is the case of a classical disaster, but at the same time, as has already been written (De Marchi et al., 1996), it is also paradoxical. It is paradoxical because, unlike the catastrophic scenes evoked at the time of the dioxin contamination in 1976, no victims were officially registered. Nevertheless, the battle for the recognition of the damage caused by the contamination still continues today in Italian courts. This is a difficult battle, particularly as far as health damage is concerned, due to the difficulty in “certifying” the damage caused by dioxin. This molecule can produce a variety of diseases, making the precise definition of relations of cause and effect very complicated. It is also a difficult battle because the victim population never mobilised outside the sphere of judicial courts, in order to call for clear indications as to the consequences for their health. Instead, the community preferred to leave the entire incident to be shrouded in silence. Parallel to the repair work of the polluted territory, which has made Seveso a small town in which the wounds of the incident have been healed by the drainage, we have also witnessed the temptation to remove the memory and intrusive stigma of the event together with the contaminated soil, as well as its controversial heritage.

I speak of a “controversial heritage” because, on the one hand, the community of Seveso succeeded in responding to the contamination by maintaining their own ties to the territory, remaining at Seveso and strongly affirming their identity as a rooted community. In this way, they prepared themselves for the recovery of what seemed to have been lost. On the other hand, the incident gave rise to rifts and divisions within this same community, leading to conflicts regarding the collective meaning they were to attribute to the experience of the disaster, as well as the lesson to be learned.

For a long time, Seveso lacked a common definition of what exactly the incident was and of the damage that it caused, not only to individuals but to an entire community. One factor contributing to this absence of a common definition of the incident is the way in which public institutions intervened in the

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emergency and their uncertain and indecisive management with regard to the dioxin damage. Another factor was the urge to individualise the damage and to reduce it to material terms, deriving from the decision of the multinational company Roche to settle the matter by extrajudicial means and through private negotiation.

In this paper, it is my intention to highlight the work begun in the 1990s by a group of environmentalists in Seveso, towards the construction of a collective memory of the disaster within the victim community. The objective of this work is to shed light on the collective dimension of the damage suffered by the population, and to define, together with the community, forms of symbolic political repair, capable of going beyond an individualised and economically quantifiable definition of the damage. This is a work which has required its militants to undergo an important change in their understanding of their own political action within a territory. A significant role in defining the means for this change was played by the women of the group, subsequent to their political experience in the Italian feminist movement.

Firstly, however, I should clearly indicate the approach I have taken to the Seveso incident in my research, that is, the instruments of analysis I have used (§1). After this, I will briefly cover the aspects of the Seveso incident which have led to the absence of a collective definition of the damage and of its repair (§2), so as to subsequently concentrate on the specific details of the work embarked upon by the environmentalist group and the important role played by the political lesson of feminism (§3).

1. A pragmatic sociological approach to the Seveso incident

The analysis of the processes leading to a common definition of the damage and of its repair helps us to understand whether or not an extreme event succeeds in triggering changes within the social system in which it has taken place, with a view to avoiding its repetition.

In order to analyse how these transformations are (or are not) produced, it was necessary to identify an approach which would allow the joint consideration of the structural and circumstantial elements within which the incident and its consequences take shape, and at the same time, the actions of subjects in response to the incident. One approach which seeks to embrace a historical and process-based perspective, structure and action, is the one developed in historical sociology around the key concept of event (Sewell, 1996). In its simplest terms, an event is an occurrence giving rise to a change in the social structure in which it was produced: in order to analyse it, it is thus necessary to adopt a historical perspective in the light of which one may evaluate the transformations caused by the event. To study an event, one must first define it, and chronologically follow the way in which actors gradually incorporate it into their frame of interpretation, and how this attribution of meaning leads to defining new resources for action.

To draw on certain observations made by Pizzorno (1996) in reference to the micro-description of social change, this possibility of transformation is linked to the rise of an event which generates the conditions of a “crisis of interpretation”. Situations of interpretation crisis are those in which something comes in to upset the normal order, and actors find themselves up against an anomaly, a more or less serious alteration of the normality of the experience. These are events which create a condition of uncertainty, and the need to actively work towards the definition and establishment of a common interpretation of what is happening: this is the work which can open the door to change.

In order to understand how the crisis situation leads to a new order, it is necessary to proceed via the moment of the dispute or of the controversy. This is the phase in which the conditions arise for an event to produce a change, that is, when different possible interpretations of what occurs meet in the public space. To analyse an event thus entails taking account of the disputes it is the subject of, together with the various interpretations attributed to it within the public space, following the process leading to the establishment of a frame of interpretation common to the actors and which defines a new order of the situation.

The study of situations of controversy or dispute represents a central aspect in the development of a line of thought which came to be defined in France in the mid-1980s, and which for reasons of simplicity we may identify as “pragmatic sociology” (Benatouil, 1999).1

1 I will limit myself to introducing only a few certain aspects of French pragmatic sociology, which contribute towards the understanding of the case study I am here presenting. To illustrate the origins and the entire framework of this school of thought would require a work of its own. In general terms, at the basis of this theoretical approach and research, we may converge, on the one hand, the work of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon in the sphere of the sociology of science and technology (Callon & Latour, 1981; Callon, 1986), and on the other hand, the work on the sociology of justification or of coordination, carried out by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thénevot (1991; 1999; 2000).
In pragmatic sociology, situations of dispute and controversy, at both the micro and macro-level (from the individual complaint to collective mobilisation), are studied as situations in which there lacks an agreement among the actors with respect to the true objectives of qualification, which ultimately leads to the shaping of a judgment of the situation, is what allows the definition of the “convenient” action to be followed (Thénevot, 1990).

Situations of controversy reveal the absence of an agreement among the actors with regard to the “tests of reality” (Boltanski & Thénevot, 1991: 168-76) which qualify the situation, and provide the intersubjective interpretation necessary to enable agreement on the action to be taken. In this perspective, the actors of a controversy are committed to proving the validity of their interpretation of the facts: they uphold a “cause”, against other opposite causes, and uphold it within the public space.

With respect to the public sphere, what the pragmatic sociological approach allows to be highlighted is the existence of constraints on public action. These constraints define the regimes of public action (or of justification), regarding not only the action of the public actor but also the everyday activities of the citizens, wherever the latter raise issues related to collective life. The central idea is that public action is subjected to a constraint of justifiability, and must thus refer to the accomplishment of a collective interest recognised as being legitimate.

Based on a series of empirical research on situations of dispute and criticism, Boltanski and Thénevot (1991) have singled out a plurality of legitimate forms of justification present in our Western societies, and alerted by actors as a means to publicly uphold their own arguments within a controversy.

This pluralism of regimes of justification offers a first instrument in order to analyse the situations of uncertainty, and the way in which different interpretations of a single controversial situation face each other in the public sphere. Such a situation is controversial precisely because it may be interpreted on the basis of various principles of justification, equally upheld by tests of reality and therefore equally citable in order to define the correct action to be taken. In this perspective, the existence of a controversy sheds light on the possibility for the various actors involved to call for different principles of justification supporting what, according to the diverse positions, should be the required action. The controversy is thus solved via the prevalence of one principle of justification with regard to the others, or via the definition of a “compromise” among the various principles of justification cited.

I would like to draw attention to the fact that, from what I have hitherto explained, we may deduce that within the framework of pragmatic sociology, mobilisation with a view to maintaining a certain interpretation of a given situation in the public sphere (as a means to orientate action) implies the need to demonstrate that a collective interest is at stake in a particular situation, through a task of de-individualisation or of rise in generality (montée en généralité). The reference to legitimate principles of justification allows reference to be made to a “common good”, recognised as such in general terms: this “good” may be participation, trust, efficiency, tradition, and so on.

Notwithstanding, in many controversies, what is given primary importance in the public space in order to question the legitimacy of the public action (Thénevot, Moody and Lafaye, 2000) is not a general collective interest, but rather what is at stake in a particular situation, in the specific forming of a network linking subjects to each other and to a context. So what happens when the claim taken to the public sphere cannot be disassociated from this rooting in the local context? Can this local context be linked to a generalisable cause, so as to be acknowledged as important for public action? What would be the

2 The concept of test of reality is central to the framework of pragmatic sociology, and precisely explains the label “pragmatic”. This links to the fact that agreement among the actors is not based exclusively on discussion. In confirming or refuting a certain interpretation of the reality, the sphere of objects and structures around the actors plays a crucial role. Objects and structures which incorporate and materialise the reference to certain principles of justification, and not to others, thus reduce the uncertainty with respect to the appropriate action to be taken.

3 Regimes of action are “models of action” which create more or less extensive forms of coordination, varying from coordination in a space of proximity (Thénevot, 1994) to coordination in the public sphere (Boltanski & Thénevot, 1991). These are descriptive models, and thus are not the reconstruction of social reality and of its objective structures, nor are they predictive models of phenomena or behaviours. These models look to clearly define the competences and resources to which each actor should have recourse in order to produce a certain type of agreement with other actors within a given context. Each model of action, directed towards the accomplishment of a given type of coordination, thus has its own corresponding “grammar”: this is the sense in which one speaks of “regimes of action” (Boltanski, 1990; Thénevot, 1990).

4 We thus have a principle of market justification, of civic justification or, moreover, of industrial justification; one of the domestic (or traditional) type, one based on opinion, and the other on inspiration.
consequences of not managing to translate these “local” demands into demands corresponding to general reasonings and interests?

The analysis of the processes of “publicising” (Cefaï & Pasquier, 2003) conflicting causes within the context of a controversy is thus not limited to tracing the various principles of justification called for by the actors. Equally important is the investigation of the ways in which, within the public sphere, demands developing from regimes of action of “proximity” may find opportunities for discussion. Such regimes are models of action directed not towards a collective interest, but rather to normative criteria rooted in the personal and local spheres.5

This final aspect is of particular significance in the controversies involving the environment.

The concept of environment pertains to a basic experience of belonging to a context with a spatial dimension. At the same time, pointing to “Environment” as “Nature” provides the possibility to shift from the particular—that is, the local—to the general—that is, the global. There are many different ways in which one may refer to the “environment” as a means to shift from the personal to the common, from the particular to the general (Lafaye & Thévenot, 1993). The word “environment” has, in itself, a strong potential for publicity, yet at the same time, it points to strong local personal “attachments” (as in the case of the Nimby phenomenon). This leads to tensions between the general definition of the collective interest linked to environmental issues, on the one hand, and a more local specification of the collective interest at stake in environmental controversies on the other.

These same tensions are to be found in the various ways of defining damage affecting the environment, as well as in the “convenient” ways of responding. I shall illustrate these tensions in the case of the Seveso incident, the difficulties in settling them and their inherent problems, in order to take the incident as an opportunity to recognise and “internalise” the externalities it produced.6

2. From the accident to the cultural conflict: dioxin risk as a political matter

In the summer of 1976, on the 10th of July, a dioxin leakage from Icmesa, a small chemical plant based in Meda (a small town of Brianza, an industrial region between Milano and Como) entirely controlled by the Swiss multinational Roche, contaminated a large and densely populated area of around 1,810 hectares. The toxic cloud entered three other municipalities, of which Seveso was the most greatly affected. Although no human deaths were directly caused by the accident, a large number of animals were killed, and the vegetation also suffered visible damage. A skin disease named chloracne had a serious effect on hundreds of children from the contaminated area, disfiguring some of them permanently. Serious concerns were raised as to the consequences of dioxin contamination on human health, due to the high laboratory-proven toxicity of this chemical molecule. Nevertheless, Seveso was merely the first episode of a massive dioxin contamination affecting an entire population. An uncommon scientific uncertainty led to a situation where decision-making on the part of political authorities became difficult, for scientists were not able to give clear indications with regard to risk assessment. Two weeks after the accident, the local government decided upon the evacuation of 700 people from the most contaminated area. These people were forced to quit their homes, leaving their belongings behind them, and the houses of the 200 people who never returned were eventually demolished.7

Seveso made real many prophecies on the irreversibility of industrial development damage, denounced at the time by environmentalists across the world. For the first time, the consequences of an industrial accident were highly uncertain, bringing to light a frightening irreversibility (Lagadec, 1981). The media played an important role in giving the Seveso accident a worldwide resonance as a tragic event.

Locally, in the months immediately after the accident, a conflict erupted between social movements coming to Seveso from “outside” to start a mobilisation in support of local victims against the multinational, and the forms of mobilisation coming from “inside” the Seveso community, resulting in the paradox whereby victims mobilised themselves against their defenders.

The conflict that I could trace through the analysis of newspaper articles, documents, books immediately published at the time, and interviews with witnesses, is mostly a conflict between the critical

5 Specifically dedicated to the study of this aspect is the research programme carried out by Laurent Thénevot, regarding the relation between public policies and proximity. In particular, see the work of Thénevot himself (2005), the studies carried out by Breviglieri on housing and urban policies (2002), and those of Stavo-Debauge on the law against discrimination (2003).
6 I use the terms “externality” and “internalisation” according to their sociological connotation given by Michel Callon (1998).
7 For a complete reconstruction (in English) of the Seveso accident, see Ramondetta and Repossi, 1998.
point of view of social movements on the one hand, linking what happened in Seveso to general questions regarding justice and considered relevant to Italian society as a whole, and on the other hand, the point of view of the local population, largely embedded in a communitarian dimension.

The tensions which arose after the accident between different forms of mobilisation were linked to different forms of qualifying the accident, the damages, and the dioxin risk, all plausible in view of the radical scientific uncertainty with regard to the effects of dioxin. The main tension was between a qualification of the accident as relevant for Italian and European society, concerning “civic” public goods, and a qualification centered upon local concerns, on collective goods defined at the local level.

This is a conflict which took on very violent overtones, and which, on the one hand, led to speaking of Seveso as a “hecatomb” or “massacre”, and on the other hand as a political “montage” or “stunt”. By taking the controversy to the extreme, two fronts came to take shape: one which exacerbated the gravity of the situation, reaching even apocalyptic terms, and another which relativised the significance and the reach of the incident, so much as to even negate the very existence of the dioxin.

The conduct of the regional authorities called to respond to the dioxin alarm had a large influence in the creation of this rift. Faced with a radical uncertainty as to the level of dioxin risk, their choice was to resist the insecurity by centralising and technicalising the decision-making process, removing it not only from broader public discussion but also from a political debate within the same institutions.

In the case of Seveso, this “centralising” treatment of the uncertainty, seeking to reduce this uncertainty by reducing the number of actors able to express themselves and thus contribute to the decision making, led not only to a series of mistakes in the setting up of instruments to monitor the consequences of the contamination, but also to a progressive loss of legitimacy on the part of the public actor. The imposition of a frame of interpretation of the problem, rather than its common construction, together with the adoption of inefficient measures which did not meet the needs of the affected subjects, led these to consider the adopted measures as illegitimate and authoritarian.

In the absence of public discussion on the problems raised by the incident and the most appropriate means for its solution, what was also missing was the common acknowledgement of a collective interest justifying the choices of the public decision-maker. Consequently, these choices were seen as the expression of an abuse of power. Hence the impossibility for the public actor to carry out a role of mediation in the conflict which had arisen at the local level, among the various expressions of “grass-roots” mobilisation in response to the incident.

At the time of the accident, social movements already active in the Italian political scene and some of the left-wing political parties (mostly the Italian Communist Party and Democrazia Proletaria, a more radical left-wing political party) mobilised themselves and sent representatives to Seveso. They organised themselves into a “Scientific Technical Popular Committee” in order to inform people, assist victims, and so on. One of the most important figures in this mobilisation was Laura Conti, a doctor linked to the Communist Party, a feminist, and one of the first Italian militants of environmentalism.8

This “leftist” mobilisation labelled the Seveso accident as a “crime”, the responsible party of which was the capitalist system of production (represented by the multinational Roche) with the complicity of the Italian government. The target of this accusation was the Democrazia Cristiana political party, which had been governing Italy throughout the “First Republic”, from 1945 until the beginning of the 1990s.

The mobilisation was linked to a more general criticism of the economic and political system: its aim was to help the people of Seveso become aware of the unfairness of the system and of their condition of victims, in order for them to join the common struggle for a political and social change. In this setting, the Seveso accident was an exemplification of capitalist violence and injustice, of the exploitation of workers, of nature and, in general, of citizens, the health of whom was under threat. The class struggle was thereby proposed to victims as a common struggle.

We may notice that in this mobilisation there is already a definition of what is at stake in this struggle, and that this definition points to general issues. In this perspective, what occurred in Seveso was an example of something happening everywhere in the same way and at all times: exploitation and injustice.

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8 Laura Conti (1921-1993) is an important figure in the story of the Seveso accident. She wrote an important book on her experience in Seveso during the “dioxin days” (Conti, 1977). In this book, she explains why and how, after Seveso, her approach to environmental issues had completely changed. Starting from Seveso, she began a political reflection on environmental issues which brought her to participate in the constitution of Legambiente in 1980, today the most important environmental association in Italy.
The people of Seveso, and their suffering, the Seveso environment, and its destruction, were all seen as evidence of the same crime, the capitalist crime affecting people across the entire world.

The leftist mobilisation pointed to the irreversibility of the damage, to the high level of risk to which the people of Seveso had been exposed, and to the attempt made by public authorities to conceal the truth about their responsibilities with respect to the accident and to the real effects of dioxin on human health.

Confronted with this interpretation of the accident as proposed by the leftist mobilisation, the people of Seveso refused to be qualified simply as victims. Being reduced to victims implied being reduced to a single dimension, the dimension of loss, the loss of everything. The people of Seveso were mostly aware of the dioxin risk, yet they decided to fight in order to stay in their homeland, against the forces which were attempting to disperse the community. What was at stake, after the accident, were the social cohesion and the social identity of the community, strongly attached to the land contaminated by dioxin. The enemy was not only the Swiss multinational and dioxin, but also the public administration deciding upon the future of Seveso without letting the population participate in this decision, and also the leftist mobilisation which had come to Seveso to fight a general battle which had nothing to do with what people acknowledged as their own welfare.

This is the reason why another mobilisation took shape in Seveso, strongly linked to Catholic movements and deeply rooted at the local level. In this setting, the accident was seen as a “misfortune”: the community had to face this trouble by sticking together. The Catholic mobilisation organised a “Centre of Coordination and Assistance”, mostly engaged in organising social services to assist families and children. The Centre also published a monthly journal, Solidarietà (Solidarity), to inform on health and dioxin issues, social services, economic problems, and so on.

The Catholic mobilisation fought for the right of the people to remain in Seveso, and offered the possibility to share suffering through communitarian activities (for example religious activities) rather than exposing it. People were aware that what had happened in Seveso was important at a general level, yet at the same time, it appeared that its relevance for the society “in general” implied neglecting the core issues of the people of Seveso. These therefore came to consider the use of the Seveso drama as an improper violence, in which there was no place for the concerns of the local people.

In this “communitarian” mobilisation, the environment was not simply linked to health issues. The environment was given a cultural dimension, it was seen as an estate, as communitarian assets, something inherited by fathers to be given in heritage to children. The environment was a landscape designed by the history of these communities, by their work, by their traditions. The environment was a property, a property shared by a community as part of a culture.

Little by little, Seveso became the arena of a cultural conflict. The failure of the left-oriented militants to mobilise Seveso victims against the multinational was explained through cultural arguments. The people of Seveso, they said, were mostly artisans and were, for the most part, Catholic, explaining their individualism and their difficulties in joining the common struggle of workers against capitalism. In a Marxist perspective, artisans were alienated, unable to recognise the common dimension of the class struggle because of their individualistic culture, incorporated in what we may call, à la Bourdieu, a habitus, or consolidated attitudes.

The communitarian mobilisation claimed the Seveso culture issue for itself, although as a positive one. The people of Seveso, resisting definitions coming from outside of what happened, defended their culture against the normalisation that political powers and militants, allied in this effort, tried to enforce. The accident was caused by the very same modernisation which political powers and militants had tried to impose on the people of Seveso against their traditions and their local attachments. In this sense, the accident was seen as a way to impose a new way of life, to impose new detached and “modernist” values, which would have destroyed more rooted values.⁹

In the opinion of the people of Seveso, the real nature of the public intervention and of the left-oriented mobilisation, that is, their cultural “crusade”, became apparent in two episodes. The first of these was the issue of abortion. Given the possible toxic effects of dioxin on the foetus, regional health authorities offered pregnant women the choice to abort, despite the fact that abortion in Italy was, at the time, considered unlawful. The abortionists arrived in Seveso in order to fight their national pro-abortion battle and to support women in their decision to abort. Again, however, the mobilisation which was intended to “liberate women” found a strong local opposition. No composition was possible, and the conflict thus

⁹ For a presentation of this “culture of Brianza”, claimed against the criticism of social movements, see the book written by Francesco Rocca (1980), mayor of Seveso at the time of the accident.
remained open, causing great suffering to those women who had found themselves facing the tragic dilemma of whether or not to abort.

The second episode is linked to the decision taken by the regional public authorities, some months after the accident, to build in Seveso, in the most contaminated area, a large incinerator meant for toxic waste produced during the decontamination process. Scientists considered burning dioxin at very high temperatures the safest way to decontaminate the polluted area. The people of Seveso organised themselves into spontaneous local committees, and fought against the public decision to build the incinerator. They proposed a different way to decontaminate Seveso, based on burying the contaminated waste in the subsoil of the most polluted area, which was then to become a green area, known today as the “Oak Wood”. People preferred the dangers of keeping toxic waste in the subsoil of their land to the hypothesis of an incinerator, which would have defaced the landscape forever. The incinerator would have marked Seveso eternally as a dump, making a true recovery from the accident impossible. This spontaneous mobilisation succeeded in creating a large coalition, forcing the authorities to change their decision and to accept the idea of a park where toxic waste would be buried.

In the complicated events of the Seveso disaster, of which I have briefly covered only certain central points, one detail is certain: what was known in 1976 with regard to the toxic action of dioxin as a result of scientific study authorised catastrophic scenes which luckily did not take place. The fact that the predicted catastrophic damage did not occur brought a complete discrediting of the position of those who argued the dangers of dioxin.

The absence of such a catastrophe endorsed the interpretation of the ideological nature of the dioxin risk, leading the affected population to lose interest in the scientific knowledge which had gradually been acquired and which would today enable a more accurate assessment of the impact of the contamination. Notwithstanding, the citizens of the affected area have never publicly expressed the demand to revise the damage caused by the dioxin.

This attitude is supported by the communitarian framework which we have seen to be locally dominant in the interpretation of the collective damage caused by Icmesa. The response of the people of Seveso to the contamination, at the very outset, was inclined towards the passive attitude of the victims, necessary in order to return to normality and regarded as the only possible direction towards the recovery of the polluted territory. The fact that this demand is ignored in the public sphere led to a frontal conflict, and not an integration, between the idea of the damage making the people of Seveso the potential victims of health risk, to be protected based on the scientific knowledge of the problem, and the idea of the damage upheld by these same citizens, claiming the seriousness of the risk of eradication from their own land. The absence of any integration between these two ideas of the damage entails that, within the affected community, closed away in the defence of their identity as the only possible way to make their point of view visible in the public sphere, there lacks a common vocabulary as a means to confront the health damage. Therefore, proving the existence of harmful consequences of dioxin is not confirmed as a collective worry; on the contrary, such evidence is almost seen as a threat which makes the efforts towards a true recovery futile.

The demand to acquire knowledge of the damage is thus not seen as a collective need, but emerges as the individual need of those who, throughout these years, have had to face an illness which is suspected to be linked to the pollution. Hence a paradox wherein we find, on the one hand, those of Seveso who today maintain that the Icmesa accident has been dwelled on for too long and that the time has come to archive the event, and on the other hand, thousands of citizens who today are still engaged in judicial proceedings in order to obtain compensation from Givaudan for the health and moral damages suffered.

Influencing the idea of the difficulty in treating the issue of damages and compensation collectively is the fact that, immediately after the accident, the incident was dealt with as an individual problem, reduced to its economic aspects (above all the loss of fixed assets) and to be solved through negotiation with the counterpart, Givaudan-Roche. Compensation was thus given without institutional mediation, and without a definition of the conventions adopted in qualifying and quantifying the damage. The predominance of a framework which individualised the giving of compensation was accompanied by the flattening of the damage as individual material loss, with no discussion taking place on the nature of the loss of collective assets, be they material or immaterial.

Given the prevailing idea of collective damage as a threat to identity, this lack of a collective definition of the damage suffered in relation to the loss of collective assets is accompanied by the idea of recovery based on the dismissal of the event and of its implications on the part of the local public context. This has not contributed to repairing the rifts produced by the incident, but has simply made them a
collectively “intractable” problem. The immediate result of this is that the reality of Seveso has continued to register alarms regarding the dioxin damage, which are difficult to deal with unless their importance is contradicted.

In this effort to “forget and move on”, the problematic implications revealed by the event with respect to the organisation of the community within the territory are erased together with the event itself. The collective dismissal of the harmful incident is now equivalent to the absence of an “internalisation” on the part of the affected community, in the sense of a lack of learning from the experience of the damage.

In this sense, a link comes to be drawn between the collective memory of the damage and of its repair, at the centre of the action of a small environmentalist group of Seveso. During the 1990s, this group began a political project, strongly rooted in the territory, which seeks to promote a common definition of the collective damage caused by the Icmesa incident within the community, thus attempting to raise the issue of repair to a symbolic political level.

3. Taking care of a “injured environment”: a feminist way to recover from disaster

After the accident, a large majority of people decided to remain in Seveso. Only a small number of inhabitants chose to leave, mostly immigrants from the South and from the North-East of Italy. The accident gave rise to a sort of “selection” of the most attached members of the community.

Among those who chose to leave Seveso, there were also some of the young militants who had participated in the mobilisation promoted by social movements. For them, it was no longer possible to carry out political action in Seveso. The accident had pushed them to political action, yet the reaction of the people in response to the mobilisation of social movements had made them aware that in Seveso there was no possibility of continuing the struggle, necessary to change the institutional system so as to avoid a repeat of the incident. During the 1980s, these young militants have been engaged in various struggles: women, in particular, had been part of the feminist movement. Despite having pursued separate political paths, they maintained strong links between them and continued to try to seek a common meaning of their flight from Seveso.

At the beginning of the 1990s, this small group of militants decided to return to live in Seveso with a new political project. Since the years of the accident, their way of conceiving political action on the environment and on environmental issues had changed. What brought this group to a new form of political engagement, directly linking the quality of the environment to the quality of human relationships in that same environment, were mostly the feminist concepts of care and relationship, together with the emphasis on practice.

Based on feminist teaching, and in particular on the Milanese version of the feminism “of difference” linked to the Libreria delle Donne (Diotima, 1987), the “practice of relations” is confirmed as a political practice, generating subjects in a context which is enlivened and brought to the fore by relations. The implementation of relational capacities in the public sphere, hinging upon the respect for others and the attention to their well-being, ensures that the power exercised in these relations is directed to the empowerment of both people and contexts, rather than their control or discipline. Establishing relations with others within a context thus implies, above all, taking care of the well-being, which can not be separated from the well-being of their life context, both material and social.

The emphasis on the central importance of relations in political action thus leads to a redefinition of the very terms of the issue of environment, far from the frameworks of both political and conservationist ecology. The quality of the environment is placed in relation to a more general social quality of the context. The issue of the environment therefore becomes a territory, in both a metaphorical and material sense, from which to promote an improvement in the quality of the at once natural and social habitat.

For political action seeking to embrace the issue of the environment, this approach to the issue of the environment comes to underline the importance of being rooted in a context within which to establish relations.

The idea is to take care of the environment, through practices giving birth to new relationships between human beings, and between human beings and their environment. The emphasis is no longer on the concept of “political duty”, nor on the concept of the “right action to be taken”, as a guide for political engagement. The political action must be rooted and must take shape in an everyday life of practices which become political because they build and change relationships in an everyday context between human beings and their environment (both human and not human). “The right action to be taken” is not known in advance:
it is defined on the basis of the situation, keeping in mind the aim to improve more “sustainable” ways of being together in a context.

One of the militants thus describes this change on the focus of their political action and the need for this change:

“Seveso is a place where doing things with your own hands is very important. For the mentality of this land, for its culture, things matter only if they are visible. Dioxin pollution was not visible. At the time of the accident, we were unable to understand the importance of the practical dimension, the importance of touching things. We launched into an ideological extrapolation of the environmental question in order to fight a global struggle. We didn’t consider, or didn’t consider enough, the vital interests, linked to everyday life, affected by the dioxin event. This is the reason why we did not succeed in our attempt to interact with the population. This is the reason why I decided to leave Seveso, because my political action at that time was intended to change a lot of things: it was not enough for me to change a small aspect of living in my neighbourhood. But after a few years, I began to see my political action as rootless. There was a sort of gap: my political action was becoming more and more universalistic, but every time I came back to Seveso I had less and less to say to the people living there.”  

This sort of gap is something that is equally felt by all the militants of the group. As another militant says:

“At a certain moment of our political path, we understood that it was necessary to convert the general protest against economic and political powers, responsible for the Seveso accident, to action taking care of this blessed land. And it was necessary to do so through an everyday, direct effort together with men and women who had continued to live there. We were a group that was running away from this place, a group that spoke only to itself and to its likes. When we decided to come back to Seveso we came out of this isolation, through a new understanding of our political engagement.”

This new political attitude becomes consolidated through a series of experiences of institutional building and innovation. First of all, the creation in Seveso of a local section, named after Laura Conti, of Legambiente, the most important environmental association in Italy. After this, in 1991-1992, the group became engaged in the recovering of a small wood in Seveso, “Fosso del Ronchetto”, which was being used as a waste dump. As one of the militants says:

“This place was neglected, full of waste. So we decided to take care of it. This is the reason why we began to spend less and less of our free time outside Seveso. This place pushed us to stay in Seveso. Then, in order to make our practice a political action, we asked for a public acknowledgement of the responsibility we had take on in caring for this public place. In order to succeed in creating new relations, our practice had to be part of an institutional frame; it had to contribute to a new institutional practice. The municipality accepted our proposal and publicly conferred us the responsibility to take care of this area. At that time, it was unusual for an environmental association to ask to do something directly: usually an association only denounced or criticised the municipality. We chose to work on making this place more beautiful, planting trees, thinking of it as a place for families, children. This made us more intimately linked to Seveso and to its people. People began to come to work with us. At the beginning, being there was a kind of duty for us, something that had to do with our ideas of what was the right thing to do; but little by little, we discovered the pleasure of doing what we did. We felt good there. This brought us to meet other people and establish new relations, and even the relations between us began to change.”

In 1996, the group of militants decided to give birth to a “social enterprise” named Natur&. Their aim is to supply innovative services for public administration, linking activities on human health and

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10 Interview with Marzio Marzorati, member of the Circolo Legambiente “Laura Conti”, Seveso, and in charge of the social and environmental municipal policies of the same town.
11 Interview with Laura Balestrini, member of the Circolo Legambiente “Laura Conti”.
12 Interview with Lele Galbiati, member of the Circolo Legambiente “Laura Conti”.
13 The idea of “social enterprise” was born in Trieste, from the experience of transforming psychiatric institutions at the beginning of the 1970s. In its initial inspiration, the social enterprise recalls innovative forms of social intervention which, on the one hand, give the capacity (and not the deficit) of actors a central importance, making them recognisable
environmental health (mostly oriented to children and elderly people), as a means to give birth to new social relations, intended to build a richer social fabric, and not merely in an economic sense.

At the same time, the group of militants began to be active in the local political arena. In 1999 the militant group contributed to the creation of a “civic list”, not directly linked to any national political party, in order to support a candidate for the election of the town mayor. The civic list won the elections and the militant group today actively participates in the government of Seveso; in particular, one of the militants is in charge of the social and environmental municipal policies. He has promoted an Agenda 21 process together with the municipalities involved in the accident of 1976 (Cesano Maderno, Desio, Meda), in a common project of sustainable development, considering “sustainable development” firstly and foremostly as socially sustainable in order to be environmentally sustainable. From this point of view, environmental and social dimensions are intimately linked, and thus, for example, collective memory is considered as a part of environmental protection as well as more usual actions of environmental protection.

This is the reason why in the year 2002, the municipality of Seveso sponsored a project, within the framework of the Agenda 21 process, promoted by the local section of Legambiente and intended to work on the memory of the Seveso accident.

The aim has been to try to define a collective memory of the accident, which is shared and is publicly visible. As one of the militants explains:

“This Seveso has a responsibility toward the world. What happened on the 10th of July 1976 should never be forgotten: I know that people try to forget what happened but it’s stupid to forget. We think that Seveso can be a positive symbol of the environmentalist struggle for a more sustainable development. Even today, the name of Seveso has the power to evoke drama, yet at the same time, it could be an example of a different way to take care of the environment as a collective good. This is the common struggle that we would like to fight with the people of Seveso. Starting from their attachments to this land.”

The need for work to be made on the memory of the incident is thus backed by the fact that to collectively remember the drama that was experienced is a form of ethical response to the trauma suffered. Maintaining the memory of the event is thus an operation which does have to do with affirming a certain truth, but above all, such a memory speaks in the present, and carries a potential for change. To remember is therefore the starting point in order to affirm the need for a series of actions in the present, looking to consolidate a “green” identity of the city of Seveso, as a redemption, repair and memory of the incident.

The issue of the memory of the accident is particularly linked to a place, “The Oak Wood”, which has grown on the most contaminated area, where toxic wastes were buried. This is a place which exists as a result of the mobilisation of the people of Seveso (see §2). Since 1996, the wood, covering an area of 42 hectares in the middle of the urban area of Seveso, has been open to the public, and since 2004, the Seveso municipality has been in charge of its maintenance. This has led to a series of questions as to the legitimate uses of this place, which conceals the remains of the demolished contaminated houses under two small hills, with all the personal belongings that were inside them. For all these years, the wood has been open to the public with no signs of its history nor of its origin.

Again, it was the feminine component within the environmentalist group of Legambiente which made the work on the land of Oak Wood a priority, so as to make visible and recognisable its nature as an “environmental compensation”:

“For us, that place was and is the origin of our political engagement and of our rooting here in Seveso. Our rooting in Seveso finds its boundaries in that place, a point of reference for the political meaning of our presence here. This is the reason why we struggled in order for the wood to remain a recognisable symbol of the chemical and environmental disaster perpetrated by the multinational Roche. This is the reason why we have never agreed with the choice of an indiscriminate opening, made up of folkloristic and purely recreational demonstrations. Instead, we proposed to make it a space of environmental education, which preserves and safeguards the memory of the event, which is too often dismissed. The idea that one can forget what that place hides in its subsoil, and perhaps even build houses on it, has always greatly disturbed us. We have always

and exercisable; on the other hand, rather than partitioning problems and issues, as is classically done by social services, social enterprises seek to activate a heterogeneous set of material and cultural resources, of subjects and of relations. For a summary of this, see de Leonardis, Mauri, Rotelli (1994).

14 Interview with Marzio Marzorati.
considered this risk as the expression of a kind of collective irresponsibility on the part of the citizens of Seveso with respect to the heritage of the incident." 15

In the year 2002, the group of Legambiente proposed a project to the municipality with a view to making the origin of this park visible, as a starting point for a process of “construction” of a collective memory of the incident.

This project led to the creation of a “memory path” in the Oak Wood, with 11 panels telling the story of the accident and of the subsequent recovery through texts and photos. Given the aim of defining a commonly shared memory of the event, the texts and photos were written and chosen by the militants of Legambiente together with a “guarantee committee” composed of 10 people from Seveso, considered as representative of the different expressions of the community and not involved in politics or public institutions at the time of the accident. After that, the panels were submitted to the inhabitants of Seveso, asking them for opinions and suggestions.

The path which led to the creation of the panels for the memory path in 2004 displayed the attempt by the Legambiente militants to place the Icmesa event at the base of a definition of the collective identity of Seveso. This identity takes the incident as a means to confirm an attachment to the territory, which translates into an active commitment to its safeguarding and value, bringing nature out as a collective good. The experience of the damage is placed at the origin of a change which looks to a future Seveso as a community which makes the safeguarding of the territory one of its main priorities.

This process of “memory building” has made evident that conflicts are always present, and that even today it is difficult to find a way to publicly speak of what happened.

In particularly, the issue of health damage caused by the dioxin remains a question which the local community does not wish to try to answer collectively. The work on the memory of the incident has thus not been an opportunity to return to the unresolved issues with new instruments, but rather, it is a work of negotiation in which the meaning given to the Icmesa event by certain sections of the local community has found a recognition, in a complex framework wherein attachment to the territory acts as an integrating bond.

In this sense, the collective memory materialised in the panels is what makes the Icmesa incident a moment in which a community is put to the test and successfully responds to the drama it has to face, a community which today, unlike yesterday, recognises the significance of what happened and the need to provide a testimony. This allows the people of Seveso to “positively” identify themselves in the Icmesa event, confirming that this was not merely a suffered drama but also a moment in which the community recognised the value of its own attachment to the territory, and making this an active instrument in response to the contamination. The memory carried by the posters is thus a composite one without being contradictory. The Oak Wood is celebrated as a victory, as a symbol of a community rooted in the territory, as the symbol of an environmentalism sharing this same attachment to the land and opening it up to a broader meaning, and also, as a symbol of commitment to the safeguarding and value of the environment.

The political action of the Legambiente group was thus successful in ensuring that the experience of the disaster was not dismissed, but on the contrary, became recognised by the people of Seveso as a heritage and as a lesson, both capable of providing energy to a project of local development which today gives central importance to the protection of the environment.

What about the issue of the health damage caused by dioxin? Was the Icmesa incident really a disaster without victims? And what meaning can this question have for the people of Seveso today, thirty years after the accident? These are questions which remain open, but which nobody seems to be interested in pursuing any further. The work promoted by the Legambiente group on the collective memory has made it possible for Seveso to speak again of the incident, and for the experience to generate a change in the present. This much was possible, however, on the condition of accepting that the most controversial issues be publicly given the word “end”.

Final Remarks

The story of the militant group that I have followed from the time of the accident until today shows how this group defined an original way to act politically, beginning with the experience, in the aftermath of the Seveso accident, of the conflict between “the civic” and “communitarian” qualification of the damage collectively suffered by the inhabitants and their environment.

15 Interview with Laura Balestrini, member of the Circolo Legambiente “Laura Conti”.
This group changed the forms of its political engagement by making attachment to the environment (both natural and social) a central issue, through practices of taking care of the environment and of social relations. This is a contribution which comes to this group directly from the political lesson of feminism.

I have attempted to show how this group, based on this feminist lesson, has been engaged in the definition of a political action seeking to make possible a composition between local practices and more general aims of social change.

For this composition, a crucial aspect appears to be the role played by institutions as a place where innovative projects could try to produce new public orientations. The militant group has radically changed its attitude towards institutions, moving from a critical attitude towards the acknowledgement of the need to personally invest in institutions. Institutions, and institutional innovation, are seen as necessary to give local practices the possibility of becoming something more than a local peculiarity. Thanks to institutions and to institutional innovation, a new form of collective interest can be pursued.

At the same time, the link between institutions and associations seems to play a central role. Associations appear to be a place where different forms of political engagement could be composed, starting from practices and local attachments to the environment, in an effort to make possible a gradual construction of the environment as a common asset, open at once to general issues treated by local institutions and to forms of personal and communitarian appropriation. The Seveso lesson shows how this composition is all but simple. It needs time, and it implies a strong collaboration between public institutions and associations, a common definition of the issues at stake which leads to the need to work on their respective boundaries, redefining practices and frames of action.

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